

# Filing Systems

## Importance of Files Management

Records management in an agency has one main goal: systematic control of recorded information from original creation to final disposition. A key element in achieving this goal is the establishment of efficient and effective procedures for filing and retrieving information.

Agencies with inconsistent or nonexistent files management programs may not find crucial information when they need it, waste time and money, and may even encounter legal trouble because of their inability to produce documentation of actions taken. Agencies that do not properly manage records cannot control the flood of information with which they are confronted or organize it for effective decision making.



*Many records that were at one time kept by hand in bound volumes are today found on computer tape or stored in environmentally-controlled microfilm vaults.*



## Statutory Requirements

The Texas Government Code §441.180 defines the responsibilities of agencies for records management to include “the management of filing and information retrieval systems in any media.” There is no standard filing system to which all Texas state agencies must adhere. This part of the *Texas State Records Management Manual* is meant to offer industry standards and recommendations for the selection, implementation, and maintenance of different types of filing systems. Each agency is responsible for determining the best method of filing records in all storage formats (hard copy, microfilm, audiovisual material, or electronic media) that the agency creates and maintains.

## Basic Types of Filing Arrangements

The selection of an appropriate filing system to organize records for storage and retrieval requires analysis of the information needs of your agency. There are three basic methods for arranging files:

- 1) Alphabetic—using letters of names, subjects, or geographic locations.
- 2) Numeric—using numbers in various combinations (including dates in a chronological arrangement).
- 3) Alphanumeric—using a combination of letters and numbers.

## Alphabetic Filing

The following are general guidelines for arranging records alphabetically, adapted from *Records Management: Integrated Information Systems*, by Patricia Wallace, et al, second edition. An alphabetic classification is used to file records by names of individuals, businesses, institutions, government agencies, subjects, topics, or geographic locations, all according to the sequence of letters of the alphabet. The complete name is a filing

segment and the parts of the name are filing units (i.e., the name Robert C. Browning is a filing segment, which has three units: first name, middle initial, and last name). The individual filing units of each name must be compared letter by letter in order to place the names in proper alphabetic sequence.



## Filing by Personal Names

To file personal names the last name of the individual is the primary filing unit. For example, consider the names *Robert C. Browning* and *Joseph B. Browne*. The first five letters of the last names are identical. The sixth letter in each name reveals a difference. By considering the names letter by letter, you know to file *Browne* before *Browning*.

**NAMES OF INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE**—All personal names should be transposed so that the individual’s last name (surname) is the primary filing unit, the first name (given name) is the second unit, and the middle name or initial is the third unit.

NAME AS WRITTEN	TRANSPosed	1	2	3
Helen Harris	Harris, Helen	Harris	Helen	
Jesse T. Oaks	Oaks, Jesse T.	Oaks	Jesse	T

**INITIALS**—An initial in a name appears before a name that begins with the same letter. This is commonly referred to as the “nothing comes before something” rule.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
D.L. Bach	Bach	D	L
D. Lawrence Bach	Bach	D	Lawrence
Don L. Bach	Bach	Don	L
Donald L. Bach	Bach	Donald	L



**IDENTICAL NAMES**—If all the filing units of two or more personal names are identical, use the city, state, and street names of the individual as identifying elements to place the names in alphabetical sequence. If this information is not available use other information such as social security number, birth date, date of hire, etc.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3	4
Lee T. Sung Austin, Texas	Sung	Lee	T	Austin
Lee T. Sung Waco, Texas	Sung	Lee	T	Waco

**NAMES WITH PREFIXES**—Prefixed surnames are considered one filing unit, disregarding any punctuation or spacing within the surname. Examples of surname prefixes are *de, de la, Des, Du, Fitz, La, Mac, Mc, O', San, Van, Vander, and Von*.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Rene de la Santo	de la Santo	Rene	
Amee La Croix	La Croix	Amee	
Dan R. MacRae	MacRae	Dan	R

A separate section of a file drawer or cabinet can be designated for common prefixes such as *Mac* or *de* if a large volume of records warrants it. In such cases, the separate group would precede the other files for that letter of the alphabet.

**ABBREVIATED PERSONAL NAMES**—Abbreviated names, such as *Edw. for Edward, Geo. for George, Thos. for Thomas, Chas. for Charles, Robt. for Robert, or Wm. for William*, are arranged as though the names were spelled out.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Chas. Harring	Harring	Charles	
Charles Y. Harring	Harring	Charles	Y
Edward Yos	Yos	Edward	
Ed. H. Yos	Yos	Edward	H

**HYPHENATED NAMES**—Surnames that are hyphenated are considered one filing unit. Be sure that the surname is indeed hyphenated, and not a middle name-surname combination in which each name is a separate indexing unit.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Raye Meton Lee	Lee	Raye	Meton
Raye Meton-Lee	Meton-Lee	Raye	

**PROFESSIONAL TITLES**—Professional titles, such as *Dr.*, *Professor*, *Captain*, *Reverend*, etc., as well as the titles *Mr.*, *Ms.*, *Miss*, and *Mrs.*, when followed by a complete name, are disregarded unless needed as an identifying element. The titles are placed at the end of the name and are enclosed by parentheses. The name is then filed according to the appropriate rules.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Dr. Anne I. Foss	Foss	Ann	I (Dr.)
Prof. K. Oslo	Oslo	K (Prof.)	
Capt. Lee Webb	Webb	Lee (Capt.)	

**SENIORITY TITLES**—Titles such as *Jr.*, *Sr.*, *2nd*, and *III* are considered separate indexing units. The titles *Jr.* and *Sr.* are arranged alphabetically. In numerical designations, Arabic numerals are placed before roman numerals and are then filed numerically in ascending order.





NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Orin Tief 3rd	Tief	Orin	3
Orin Tief 4th	Tief	Orin	4
Orin Tief III	Tief	Orin	III
Joseph Wilkes IV	Wilkes	Joseph	IV
Joseph Wilkes, Jr.	Wilkes	Joseph	Jr.
Joseph Wilkes, Sr.	Wilkes	Joseph	Sr.

**DEGREES**—Academic degrees and other professional designations written with a name are disregarded for filing purposes unless needed as identifying elements.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Jane Brown, Ed.D.	Brown	Jane (Ed.D.)	
Alice Pine	Pine	Alice	
Alice Pine, Ph.D.	Pine	Alice	Ph.D.
Aldo Sills, CPA	Sills	Aldo	CPA
Aldo Sills, J.D.	Sills	Aldo	J.D.

## Filing by Business Names

In general, each important word in a business name is considered a separate indexing unit.

**ABBREVIATIONS**—Abbreviations such as *Co.*, *Inc.*, *Ltd.*, *Mfg.*, *Genl.*, and *U.S.* are arranged as though they were spelled out.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3	4
Penta Data Graphics Co.	Penta	Data	Graphics	Company
United Refill, Inc.	United	Refill	Incorporated	
U.S. Borax, Ltd.	United	States	Borax	Limited

**ARTICLES, PREPOSITIONS, CONJUNCTIONS**—Small words included in business names, such as the articles *a* and *the*, the prepositions *from*, *to*, *by*, *in*, *of*, *on*, and *at*, the conjunction *and*, and the *ampersand* (&) are all disregarded for filing purposes. These words should be written in parentheses within the filing unit.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Ritt, Wil, & Smits	Ritt	Wil (and)	Smits
Ungre' & Yee Co.	Ungre' (and)	Yee	Company
Ungre' Yabo at Sussex	Ungre'	Yabo (at)	Sussex



**HYPHENATED BUSINESS NAMES**—A hyphenated business name will usually be the last names of the individual owners. Consider each part of the hyphenated business name a separate filing unit.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Nambly-Oak Publishing Co.	Nambly	Oak	Publishing Company
Wilson-Tide Mfg.	Wilson	Tide	Manufacturing

**COMPOUND NAMES**—Compound names, which are formed by joining two words or a prefix and a word, are handled as one unit. Disregard the hyphen that is usually in such names.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Interstate Van	Interstate	Van	
Inter-State Van & Storage	Inter-State	Van (and)	Storage
South-West Auto Club	South-West	Auto	Club
Southwest Computer Co.	Southwest	Computer	Company

**COINED WORDS AND TRADE NAMES**—Coined names are phonetic spellings, prefixes or suffixes, or other combinations of letters or words. Such words in business names are one indexing unit.



NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
NuLawn Supplies	NuLawn	Supplies	
Ship-to-Shore Freight Lines	Ship-to-Shore	Freight	Lines

**SINGLE LETTERS**—Single letters in business names are treated as separate indexing units. Disregard any punctuation marks or spaces used with such letters.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3	4
CAR Computer	C	A	R	Computer
C.A.R. Motors	C	A	R	Motors
K & B Paper	K (and)	B	Paper	

**COMPOUND GEOGRAPHIC NAMES**—Each word in a compound geographic name is a separate unit.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3	4
El Dorado Springs College	El	Dorado	Springs	College
Elk River Park	Elk	River	Park	

**POSSESSIVES**—When alphabetizing names with an apostrophe, consider all letters in the word up to the apostrophe.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Austin's Water	Austin ('s)	Water	
Austins on the Lake	Austins (on the)	Lake	
Austins' Youth Camp	Austins (')	Youth	Camp

**NUMBERS IN NAMES**—Names beginning with numerals are arranged in ascending numerical sequence. Such records are filed separately preceding the alphabetically arranged names. If the numbers appearing at the beginning of the name are spelled out, they are filed according to the alphabetic rules. The entire number, when spelled out, is considered one filing unit.



NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
6th Street Bowl	6 (th)	Street	Bowl
2500 Reprographics	2500	Reprographics	
Four Hundred Club	Four Hundred	Club	

Names with numerals appearing other than at the beginning are filed preceding the first similar name without a numeral.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Barr's 600 Inn	Barr ('s)	600	Inn
Barr's Tax Service	Barr ('s)	Tax	Service
Borden 100 Hardware	Borden	100	Hardware
Borden 222 Plumbing	Borden	222	Plumbing



## Filing by Government Names

Government agencies include the various levels of government and political divisions (federal, state, county, city) and their subdivisions (offices, bureaus, departments, commissions, agencies). The general rule is to arrange files by the distinctive name of the governmental unit. If all filing units are identical in the names, use the city, state, street name, and building name or number as identifying elements.

**FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**—When indexing names of departments or agencies of the federal government, use the words *United States Government* as the first indexing unit. Then index by the department name, followed by the office or bureau designation.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Department of Defense, Office of Special Investigations	United States Government	Defense Department (of)	Special Investigations Office (of)
Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs	United States Government	Interior Department (of)	Indian Affairs Bureau (of)



**STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS**—State and local governmental units include states, counties, cities, and towns. Use the geographic name as the primary filing unit, followed by its designation as county, state, city, and so on. The name of the department or agency is the last filing unit.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3	4
Fulton County Health Dept.	Fulton	County	Health	Department
Bureau of Highways, Iowa	Iowa	State	Bureau (of)	Highways
Plano Chamber of Commerce	Plano	City	Chamber (of)	Commerce

**FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS**—Arrange names of foreign units of government by their distinctive name and then by their particular designation.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Commonwealth of Australia	Australia	Commonwealth (of)	
Parliament of the Kingdom of Norway	Norway	Kingdom (of)	Parliament (of the)

## *Filing by Institutional Names*

Institutions include hospitals, financial institutions, schools, colleges, and universities.

**HOSPITALS**—Names of hospitals are filed as written, followed by the city and state names.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
Austin State Hospital Austin, Texas	Austin State Hospital	Austin	Texas
Veterans Hospital Austin, Texas	Veterans Hospital	Austin	Texas
Veterans Hospital Tyler, Texas	Veterans Hospital	Tyler	Texas

**FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS**—Financial institutions include banks, savings and loan associations, trust companies, and insurance companies. Arrange by the distinctive names of these institutions, followed by the city and state names. If other information such as branch name is necessary, each word is considered an additional filing unit.



NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3	4
Saratoga Bank Lafayette Branch, Dallas, Texas	Saratoga Bank	Dallas	Texas	Lafayette Branch
Saratoga Bank Oakside Branch, Dallas, Texas	Saratoga Bank	Dallas	Texas	Oakside Branch
Security Mortgage Irving, Texas	Security Mortgage	Irving	Texas	

**SCHOOLS**—Arrange names of elementary and secondary schools (junior high, intermediate, and high schools) first by their distinctive names, then by their cities, and then by their states. Note that when an individual’s complete name appears in the school’s name, the personal name is transposed for filing purposes.

NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
John F. Kennedy High School Austin, Texas	Kennedy, John F. High School	Austin	Texas
John F. Kennedy High School Austin, Vermont	Kennedy, John F. High School	Austin	Vermont
Madison Middle School Tyler, Texas	Madison Middle School	Tyler	Texas

**COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**—File colleges and universities by their distinctive names, followed by the names of their cities and states. If the word *college* or *university* appears as the first unit in the name, rearrange the name so that the distinctive word appears first.



NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3	4
Emory University Medical School, Atlanta, Georgia	Emory University	Medical School	Atlanta	Georgia
University of Texas at Austin, Texas	Texas, University (of)	Austin	Texas	
University of Texas at Dallas, Texas	Texas, University (of)	Dallas	Texas	

## *Filing by Subject*

A common method of alphabetic filing is subject filing, which is the arrangement of records by topics or categories rather than by personal or business names. The two methods of subject filing are known as the dictionary system and the encyclopedia system.

A dictionary system is one in which records are arranged in alphabetic sequence similar to the way words are listed in a dictionary, with no grouping of related topics. This system is often applied to a small volume of records in which no one topic is large enough to need subdividing.

An encyclopedia system is one in which records are stored under major topic names or geographic locations, then according to related subheadings. When a larger volume of records must be stored by subject, the encyclopedia system is the better choice. In addition to having records filed under the major topic, you can create subheadings of related subjects for each of the major topics.

**CODING SUBJECT FILES**—A subject filing classification system requires the use of a relative index. The relative index is a list, in alphabetic order, of all the topic names that are used in the system. Use of the index can significantly reduce the chance of a record being incorrectly filed.

Before a record can be coded for subject filing, the file worker must refer to the relative index to find out under what topic name the record will be filed. Those who are

involved in filing must inspect the record carefully to determine the most appropriate topic and subheading.

To code subject files, arrange the topic names or categories in alphabetic sequence. Each topic is filed as written, with each important word considered a separate filing unit. Many of the guidelines for filing business names can also be used for filing names of topics alphabetically.

A systematic procedure should be followed to prepare the records for filing (this is true in any filing system) and to specify the location for coding the documents. The upper right hand corner is the most commonly used location. The coding should contain the subject heading and any cross-referencing information.

The following steps are suggested for subject filing.

- 1) Read the document.
- 2) Check for enclosures.
- 3) Check for references to previous correspondence.
- 4) Determine the subject of primary importance.
- 5) Underline keywords or phrases of primary importance.
- 6) Select the broad subject classification.
- 7) Determine if it pertains to a policy, a general area, or a specific file.
- 8) Select the primary heading within the classification group (using the relative index).
- 9) Select the appropriate secondary and tertiary headings, if needed.
- 10) Mark the file heading on the upper right hand corner of the document.
- 11) Cross-reference material that pertains to one or more subjects.





## *Filing by Geographic Location*

Geographic filing involves arranging records alphabetically according to the names of geographic locations. As in subject filing, records in a geographic system can be classified either in a dictionary arrangement or an encyclopedia arrangement. The number of geographic divisions used is based on the volume of records, the size of the geographic boundaries, and the number of subdivisions required.

An agency that operates throughout the state may divide its files first by county, then city or town, and then by names of individuals or number designations of field offices. An agency with several offices within a single city may require a geographic system that is divided by districts of the city, and then by street names.

Within each geographic file, records can be arranged alphabetically by name or chronologically by date of receipt or action.

To arrange files in geographic order, use the primary geographic name as the basis for filing records in alphabetic sequence. Each word in the name is considered a separate filing unit.

## *Numeric Filing*

Numeric filing uses numbers directly from a record, such as a purchase order number, or relies on the use of assigned numbers. If the numeric arrangement is an indirect access system, an index to the files is almost always used to retrieve information. Once the assigned number has been determined from the index, the file worker can file or retrieve records easily.

Numeric filing systems include the straight-numeric, duplex-numeric, chronological, terminal-digit, middle-digit, and decimal filing systems.

## Straight-Numeric

Straight-numeric filing is a system in which files are arranged consecutively in ascending order, from the lowest number to the highest.

Just as in a personal or business name, where each word is considered an indexing unit for filing, in a straight-numeric filing system, each digit in a number is a filing unit. The primary units, the first digits, of a group of numbers are compared to determine the proper numeric sequence for filing. Only when the primary units are identical are the second or subsequent units compared to determine the sequence in which records should be placed.



NAME AS WRITTEN	1	2	3
File 165	1	6	5
File 168	1	6	8
File 170	1	7	0

## Duplex-Numeric

A duplex-numeric system uses two or more sets of code numbers for records, with the sets separated by dashes, commas, periods, or spaces. Records are filed consecutively by the primary number and then sequentially by the secondary number, and so on.

The duplex-numeric system lends itself to the subject and geographic systems that use the encyclopedia arrangement, with subdivisions of each major category of names. For example,

Taxation Division	12
Taxation Committee	12-10
Federal	12-10-1
State	12-10-2



Personnel Publications	12-11
Employee Guide	12-11-1
Retirement Plan	12-11-2

Coding files in a duplex-numeric order is similar to the requirements for alphabetic subject filing, in that a relative index must be developed if the system is to be used effectively. The index must list the primary numbers assigned to major categories of information, with appropriate listings of the various subdivisions within the major headings.

## *Chronological*

Chronological filing is a type of numeric arrangement, which uses numeric dates as the indexing units. The most common order of units is year, month, and day, as in 89-12-06 to denote the sixth of December, 1989. It is also common practice to order the most current dates first. Chronological filing is generally used for records that are called for by date of receipt or action.

## *Terminal-Digit*

Terminal-digit numeric filing is considered by many to be the most efficient of the numeric filing methods. In this arrangement the last digit is the primary unit used for filing; the units are filed in order by the last digits, middle digits, and then the first digits in the number. For example, file number 24-68-10 is broken down as:

NAME AS WRITTEN	PRIMARY UNIT	SECONDARY UNIT	FINAL UNIT
24-68-10	10	68	24

The terminal-digit system can accommodate large volumes of records because the numbers can be divided into groups of several digits and still be easily managed. The number of digits used in each group depends on the current and projected capacity of the filing system.



## Middle-Digit

The middle-digit is similar to terminal-digit, but the middle digit of each number becomes the primary indexing unit. The units are filed in order by first the middle digits; next, according to the digits on the extreme left side; and last, according to the digits on the extreme right side of the number. Depending on the number of digits in the file numbers assigned, the middle digit may consist of one digit (14-8-6), two digits (1-22-64), or more. For example, file number 24-68-10 is divided into indexing units this way:

NAME AS WRITTEN	PRIMARY UNIT	SECONDARY UNIT	FINAL UNIT
24-68-10	68	24	10

The advantages of terminal-digit and middle-digit arrangements in comparison to straight numeric filing include:

- Equal distribution of records throughout the records storage area.
- Assignment of one file worker responsible for one section of the files.
- Increased filing speed and accuracy.

## Decimal Numeric

The decimal numeric filing arrangement is perhaps the most commonly used and widely known numeric filing method. Developed primarily for library use in the late 1800's, the decimal system is based on ten general categories (for example, 500 Pure Science). The major numeric groupings are each further divided into ten parts (540 Chemistry), which are then subdivided into ten subunits (540.1 Philosophy and Theory).





The basic procedures of developing categories and subdivisions are easily adapted to most records holdings. For example:

#### 500 Agency Studies

##### 510 Committee Assignments

##### 510.1 Environmental Impact

##### 510.2 Internal Automation

The most effective application of this arrangement is in situations that require that records be classified by subject or by geographic location. The advantages of the decimal system include:

- Virtually unlimited expansion of files because of the fine divisions within each of the major codes.
- Rapid retrieval because of the simplicity of the decimal system.
- Convenience of referencing and retrieval because all related records are grouped together.

When coding within a decimal filing arrangement a relative index must be used, which lists the number codes assigned to each category of record or its divisions. The file worker refers to the index to determine which major decimal categories are to be assigned to a file.

## *Alphanumeric Filing*

Alphanumeric filing may use a combination of personal or business names and numbers, or more commonly, subject names and numbers. Once the alphabetic divisions or topic headings and appropriate subdivisions have been determined, number categories can be assigned. If larger quantities of records are to be stored within the system, smaller divisions within each letter of the alphabet can be used. A relative index lists the number codes assigned to each letter of the alphabet

or to its divisions. The file worker refers to the index to determine the primary filing digit to be assigned to a file for a new correspondent or document.

## *Selecting a Filing Arrangement*

Within the three basic types of filing arrangements—alphabetic, numeric, and alphanumeric—there can be applied any number of variations designed to fit the needs of the agency. Because each has certain advantages and limitations, the selection of a filing arrangement involves the consideration of multiple factors. The most important of these include examining the characteristics of the records and choosing between either direct or indirect access to files.



## *Characteristics of Records*

The first step in selecting an appropriate filing arrangement is to carefully look at characteristics of your agency's records practices. There are four main characteristics to examine:

- 1) *How records are used or requested*—The nature of the records and how they will be identified should be the first determining factor in your selection of an arrangement for filing. If client files are referenced by name, alphabetic arrangement is indicated; invoices requested by number will best be filed in numeric order; and correspondence, if retrieved by subject, should be filed alphabetically by subject.
- 2) *How many records are maintained*—In an agency that maintains a small volume of records, an alphabetic arrangement is generally adequate. However, in any agency where more records are maintained and the filing system may need to be more expandable, the better choice may be numeric or alphanumeric filing.
- 3) *Size of the agency*—The size of your agency may dictate the number of individuals responsible for the actual filing of records, as well as those who are



authorized to have access to stored records. Usually, although there are exceptions, the larger the agency, the greater the number of people who will process or use the records.

- 4) *Who uses the records*—The system you select should be appropriate to the people using the records. A subject classification system may be more useful for records that are best defined by specialized topics, whereas records which fall into easily identified groups and which must be accessed by many employees are better arranged by number.

## *Direct or Indirect Access*

Another important consideration in the selection of a filing arrangement is the type of access you want the system to provide. There are two types, direct access and indirect access.

A direct access system is one in which a person can locate a particular record by going directly to the files and looking under the name of the record. An alphabetic arrangement is generally designed to be direct access.

An indirect access system is one in which an index is used to determine the code assigned to a record. Numeric, alphanumeric, and alphabetic subject filing arrangements are often indirect access.

You will decide which access method is best suited for the characteristics of your records. When making your decision, there are features of each which should be considered.

## *Direct Access*

Advantages of direct access:

- Records can be located by going directly to the files. The need for an auxiliary index is eliminated.

- Browsing of files is allowed.
- Time is saved both in filing and retrieving records.

Limitations of direct access:

- The system is cumbersome to use when large volumes of records are stored.
- Frequent confusion and congestion can occur when dealing with files with common, similar, or identical names.
- Strict filing rules need to be written and communicated.
- Duplication of records is a common problem; there is no index to show whether a file already exists under a particular name.



## *Indirect Access*

Advantages of indirect access:

- Better security is provided for records. It is very difficult for individuals unfamiliar with the coding system to gain access to specific records.
- The system is most efficient when large volumes of records are stored.
- Duplication of records can be avoided because each code can be used only once.

Limitations of indirect access:

- Use of an index is almost always required to obtain the code assigned to a record.
- Filing accuracy is dependent on accuracy of index; in numeric filing, numbers are easily transposed.



- Maintaining indexes and annotating codes is time-consuming and can create bottlenecks.
- Browsing of files is an option for staff, if preferred.

## *Questions About Your Filing System*

The following are some questions to ask about any new filing system that you are considering. These questions can also be used to evaluate an existing system.

- 1) Is the system logical? Logic speeds learning, so staff members do not have to rely on memory alone. The method behind the system should be clear and should follow a definable line of reasoning. For example, how much time is needed for retrieving and refiling records?
- 2) Is the system practical? The system must not be so sophisticated or complex that it fails to serve the purpose for which it was designed. Does it do what you want it to do? For example, do drawers, guides, and folders have easily identified and descriptive labels?
- 3) Is the system simple? Simple here means easy to learn. The system should be as straightforward as possible, with little (and preferably no) room for interpretation. For example, are out-cards used to quickly identify where a record is located?
- 4) Is the system functional? Does it relate to the function of the records it addresses? As mentioned earlier in the selection characteristics, an alphabetic arrangement would be ill suited to records called for by number, and numeric filing would be inappropriate for records requested by name alone. For example, have you analyzed your filing arrangement in relation to how records are retrieved?
- 5) Is the system retention-conscious? Your filing system should be geared to your retention schedule in a way that allows you to move records from active to

inactive storage, and to remove those with expired retention periods. These activities should be done according to the approved agency records retention schedule. For example, are you filing non-records?

- 6) Is the system flexible? You should be able to expand it when you need. Additional or different classifications might be needed in the future, or your agency may experience unforeseen growth; your filing system should be able to grow as well. For example, are file drawers overcrowded because the current system did not allow for expansion?
- 7) Is the system standardized? The terms used in the general classification plan should be standardized because using different terms to describe the same record or subject will cause confusion. Also, there should be a written set of rules that all filing personnel follow to avoid lost files, misfiles, and unplanned duplication of records and filing locations. For instance, one person should not file correspondence under the name of the sender if the agency rule is to file under the topic of the document.
- 8) Does the system have identified problems? Some indications of the need to redesign a filing system are overcrowded file drawers, misfiles, excessive time required for retrieval of records and refiling, files taken out of the system without any way to track who has them, and inadequate labeling of file drawers, guides, and folders.



## *Consistency—Key to Effective Filing*

Whichever filing system you select, the key to effective information maintenance and retrieval is consistency. The filing staff should have access to a files manual or some arrangement of documented procedures for proper files handling within your agency. Filing standards should be applied to all formats of information storage. Electronic media, microfilm,



and hard copy formats must be systematically arranged to make the most out of your records management program.

An efficient filing system can be one of your agency's most valuable tools in achieving the goal of records management: the systematic control of recorded information from original creation to ultimate disposition.

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